DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 477 CG 027 875

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TITLE	An Outcome Assessment of a High School Peer Helpers Program.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	18p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; Conflict Resolution; *Evaluation Needs; *Helping Relationship; High School Students; High Schools; Measurement Techniques; *Peer Counseling; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS	Outcome Oriented Evaluation; Peer Support

ABSTRACT

Peer helping has become a popular method of dispute resolution in many secondary schools. However, evaluation of such programs is usually anecdotal in content. In order to add to the quantitative data on the effectiveness of peer helping, a peer helping effectiveness scale was designed and implemented; the results of this evaluation effort are reported here. The scale was used to test the hypothesis that a peer helpers program would be effective in assisting students with their problems. Different types of peer programs and their effectiveness are discussed and ways in which to develop a peer helper program are provided. The evaluation tool, which was administered to 477 high school students, was designed to assess students' perceptions of the peer helping program. Results indicate that the students felt neutral about the peer helper program in their school. The large number of students reporting no use of the program at all could be attributed to several factors, including lack of need for the program. A copy of the survey is included. (RJM)

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An Outcome Assessment of a High School Peer Helpers Program

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1997

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Abstract

Peer helping has become a popular method of dispute resolution in many secondary schools during the 1990's. Although anecdotal evaluation of peer helping programs provides encouraging support for the effectiveness of these programs, there is little published quantitative data on the effectiveness of peer helper programs. Therefore, an experimenter designed and validated Peer Helping Effectiveness Scale was used to measure the effectiveness of a peer helpers program. It was hypothesized that a peer helpers program would be effective in assisting the students with their problems, as operationalized by the students' responses to an assessment survey. Preliminary results support the hypothesis.

An Outcome Assessment of a High School Peer Helpers Program

Peer helping has become a popular method of dispute resolution in the 1990's, due to its utility in aiding the resolution of conflicts among students, freeing teachers to perform academic tasks. Other pragmatic reasons for using a peer helpers program are to improve school-based support for children with social / emotional / behavioral problems and to reduce the amount of crisis intervention by the support services. Specific aims for adolescents include building confidence, improving social skills, and promoting acceptance of others as individuals with unique strengths and weaknesses (Kristel, Young, & Chambliss, 1996).

According to Johnson and Johnson, (1994), a peer helpers program must be established to handle conflicts constructively in a high school setting. Such a program would stress the ability of students to negotiate agreements to their conflicts of interest, and if negotiations fail, to seek the help of a peer mediator.

Johnson and Johnson (1994) noted that there are several worthwhile incentives for implementing a peer helping program. These programs assist in making schools orderly and peaceful places in which quality education can take place. Also, an active program can ensure that future classes of students are prepared to manage

conflicts constructively in career, family and community. If adolescent students are taught how to manage conflicts constructively at an early age, students are more likely to maintain the use of the conflict resolution procedures and skills for the rest of their lives (Johnson & Johnson 1994).

Benson and Benson (1993), advocate a selection process in which high school students nominate peer helpers; those students with the highest numbers of nominations are selected for training. However, the selection process should not be presented as a popularity contest. When properly administered, the final selection of potential mediators are those students whom are already respected as leaders and perceived as potential mediators. It is likely that this selection process will involve student leaders from all groups within the student body.

Burrell and Vogl (1990) suggest several different criteria for selecting peer helpers. School faculty are directed to look for assertive, leader types, usually from large families, because they are already skilled communicators. Potential peer helpers are not necessarily "straight A" students nor perfect attendance holders. Some schools ask both teachers and students to nominate prospective mediators, whereas other schools ask for student volunteers. No matter which selection process is used, school officials should

evaluate candidates on their interpersonal skills. The students selected should be good listeners; they should be able to detect disputants' hidden agendas in addition to identifying key issues in the conflict. Interviewing and question-asking skills are of primary importance for candidate selection. Lastly, the peer helpers' possession of patience and a sense of humor can provide the difference between a successful or failed helping incident (Burrell & Vogl, 1990).

Hugill, Hindmarch, Woolford, and Austen, (1987), implemented a quasi-peer helping program for children with social difficulties in a secondary school. The general aim of their group sessions was to promote joint work between the school and Social Services for the benefit of adolescents with problems. Specifically, group session objectives aimed to provide alternative strategies to deal with difficult situations, increase adolescent's ability to accept positive and negative criticism, and to help adolescents express their feelings and needs (Hugill et al, 1987).

Lieberfeld (1994) credits mediation with certain significant contributions in secondary schools. Peer helper programs can help to reestablish norms of nonviolence and respectful communication between groups after violence had called these norms into question. The investigative work and conversations with students clarified

misinformation, dispelled rumors, and let students know that their concerns and emotional welfare were important to adults in positions of authority. Finally, mediators also arranged safe, neutral settings in which students could meet and helped effect several interpersonal reconciliations (Lieberfeld, 1994).

Yet another example of how high school peer helpers programs can be useful involves application to the problem of teen suicide. According to Dunne-Maxim, Godin, Lamb, Sutton, and Underwood, (1992), the national suicide rate has increased markedly for youth between the ages of 15 and 19 years. The most dramatic changes in this age category have occurred with young men. Youth suicide has become the second leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States. Peer helper programs can serve as an early warning system for a school-based suicide prevention plan. The trained adolescents can be taught to identify the signals of a suicidal mindset. The students in perceived danger would then be referred to professional adult caregivers. Peer helper programs can apply this tactic in the aftermath of an actual teen suicide, when a postvention plan is of utmost importance. The goals of postvention (and the peer helpers program) are twofold. The first is to help survivors of suicide adaptively cope with their loss and facilitate a healthy grieving process. The second aim is to help identify and

refer for services those individuals at risk for suicidal behavior or other maladaptive coping responses (Garfinkel, 1989).

Developing the Current Peer Helper Program

To tailor this program to the needs of current high school students, pilot studies were conducted to specify key areas of student concern and to evaluate how adolescents presently handle conflicts. Research by Kristel and Young (1996) showed that the top five reported problems in a typical suburban high school were achievement, stress, drug use, friends, and family. To deal with these problems, the majority of students reported seeking help from friends (52.4%), parents (13.9%), or a combination of the two (13.7%) (Kristel & Young, 1996). This tendency to seek out peers for help supports the premise that a peer helpers program, correctly implemented in the high school, can build on existing helping networks to further assist high school students.

Although anecdotal evaluation of peer helping programs provides encouraging support for the effectiveness of these programs, there is little published quantitative data on the effectiveness of peer helper programs. Therefore, a comprehensive research method (utilizing both archival data and self-report measures) was used to measure the effectiveness of a peer helpers program. It was hypothesized that a peer helpers program would be

effective in assisting the students with their problems, as operationalized by the students' responses to an assessment survey.

Method

Subjects

Four hundred and seventy-seven high school students responded to a survey administered in a medium-sized public, suburban high school. Of the respondents, 106 were in eighth-grade, 109 were in ninth-grade, 107 were in tenth-grade, and 138 were in eleventh-grade. Twelfth grade students were not included in the sample. Most subjects could be classified as coming from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.

Questionnaire

The self-report questionnaire was designed to assess students' perceptions of the peer helping program. This identification was operationalized by developing a seven item scale of perceived pressures and problems. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: an experimenter-created Peer Helpers Effectiveness Scale, the Perceived Pressure Scale (Kristel & Young, 1996), and a section of demographic questions (Appendix). A separate answer sheet was used for the recording of each subject's responses to the questionnaire.

Procedure

On the basis of piloting, problem items selected for inclusion in the Peer Helping Effectiveness Scale were characterized by appropriate face validity regarding commonly considered adolescent concerns. Each item included in the questionnaire was ranked (Likert style) from a positive three to negative three. Final scores were computed by subtracting the three negative and one neutral item from the three positive items.

The survey was administered to the student body during the morning homeroom session. Of the possible questionnaire administration periods available throughout the day, this was considered the best because in homeroom students are likely to be alert, attentive, and a "captive audience," entertaining fewer distracting thoughts (as opposed to a questionnaire administration held later in the day).

Since the desire for social acceptance often leads people to respond to personal questions in a way they believe others would approve, the questionnaire was administered anonymously, with individual responses remaining confidential. Although gender can influence the results of a study, the overall sex ratio at the high school was previously determined to be close to a 1:1 ratio, ensuring that an approximately equal number of males and females would be surveyed. Forty answer sheets were not entered in data

analysis, due to the subjects' inability to properly record their responses onto the Scan-Tron sheets (e.g. filling out the form in pen, not completely filling out the survey).

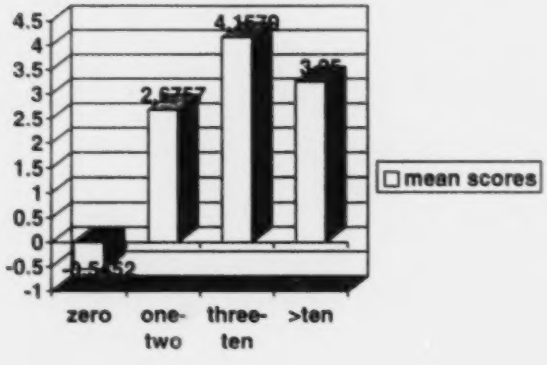
Results

Reliability estimates of the Peer Helping Effectiveness Scale were obtained by inter-correlating the individual items in the scale. The resulting Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .51, which is moderately good. Strong correlations between the scale and a number of demographic questions established some degree of face and criterion validity (e.g. for the number of visits made to a peer helper, $r=.252$, $p<.001$).

The distribution of the results from the Peer Helpers Effectiveness Scale resembled a bell curve, ranging from -14 to 14 with a median and modal score of 0 and a standard deviation of 4.182. Oneway ANOVAs were performed on the scale scores, with significant results obtained for the variables of the number of times a student went for help ($F(3) = 16.267$, $p<.001$) and for with whom the student felt most comfortable going to for help ($F(4) = 2.874$, $p<.05$). Mean score analysis of the number of program uses by the helping scores indicated higher scores for students who used the program three to ten times ($x=4.1579$, $sd= 3.167$, $n=19$) as

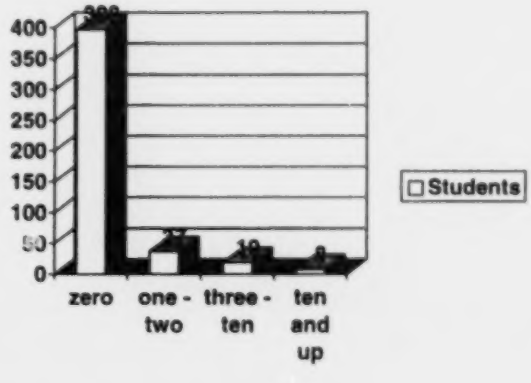
opposed to those who did not use the program (x=-0.5452, sd= 3.883, n=398).

Mean scores of helpers scale results by amount of visits to a peer helper.



An analysis of program uses by the number of students indicated that a majority of students (398) did not use the peer helpers program at all, while 64 individual students did use the program.

Number of Program Uses by Students



The ANOVAs did not reveal any significant differences among high school classes and sexes.

Discussion

The frequency distribution of the results from the Peer Helper Effectiveness Scale showed that the students' feelings about the Peer Helpers' program are neutral. Also, the large number of students reporting no use of the program at all could be attributed to several causes. First, there could simply be a lack of need for the program at the school. If not enough students have the problems that the peer helpers could assist with, then a peer helpers program could be obsolete. Since it is doubtful that this is the reason for the high amount of student non-use, the low use and neutral feelings could be due to a lack of awareness of the program. This obstacle could be tackled with increased publicity and possibly introductory sessions in classrooms or homerooms. Lack of access to the peer helpers program could also be a factor contributing to these findings. If the student helpers are only available at certain times of the day, that makes them inaccessible to those who are unavailable at those times. Additionally, there could be a stigma generated by the peer group of a student who shares his problems with a peer helper. The members of the peer cohort could deem this action as "uncool" or take the action as a

sign that the student does not trust his own group of friends enough to share his/her problems with them. Fears of confidentiality may also be prevalent. The students may be unaware that the peer helpers hear confidential information that may only be shared with school administration in cases of emergency.

The mean scores analysis of the number of program uses by the helping scores show that those who do use the program have a positive perception of the program and are more likely to return to the peer helpers with future problems. The future of the program then hinges on widening the range of the program to involve more students on both ends, as peer helpers and those willing to share their problems.

Future directions for research will include looking in greater detail at some of the possible sources of the neutral feelings about the peer helpers program and low use of the program. As stated above, possible reasons could include a lack of awareness of the program, a lack of access to it, stigma associated with it, fears of confidentiality, or a limited need for the program.

Appendix

This survey affects you! Please read it carefully. Results from this survey will be used to select and train individuals within the school to provide help to students who want it. Your responses are confidential and anonymous.

Read each question carefully. Write your responses with a #2 pencil, filling in the space on the answer sheet that matches your response.

1. I am:
   A. Female B. Male

2. I am in grade:
   A. 8 B. 9 C. 10 D. 11 E. 12

3. I have __ brothers and/or sisters (include stepbrothers/sisters):
   A. none (0)
   B. one (1)
   C. two (2)
   D. three or more

4. My parents are:
   A. married
   B. separated/divorced
   C. other (for example, if you stay with your aunt all the time)

5. When I have a problem, I usually try to get help from:
   A. a friend
   B. a parent
   C. an adult at school (teacher or counselor)
   D. an adult outside of school (religious advisor, youth worker, neighbor, relative, family friend)
   E. a Peer Helper

6. I have gone to a Peer Helper for advice on a problem that was bothering me __ times in the last six months (since last September).
   A. zero
   B. one-two
   C. three-ten
   D. more than ten

The items listed below deal with your Peer Helpers Program. For each statement, please indicate whether you strongly agree (A), agree (B), are neutral (C), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (E) with it.

7. The Peer Helpers have shown me how to handle my problems better.
8. I haven't gone to a Peer Helper to aid me with a problem, because I don't think that they could help.
9. The Peer Helpers were unable to help me with my problem(s).

10. I feel comfortable going to the Peer Helpers (even if it's just for someone who can listen to me), and I'm glad they're here.
11. I would rather suffer silently than trust a Peer Helper with my problems.
12. The Peer Helpers have done a great job helping and guiding me with my problem(s).
13. The overall effect of the Peer Helpers at PV has been zero -- they haven't hurt, but they haven't helped either.

The items listed below deal with common problems in some schools. For each statement, please indicate whether you strongly agree (A), agree (B), are neutral (C), disagree (D), or strongly disagree (E) that the item is a problem for you or for Perkiomen Valley High School.

14. Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional, or threats of same)
15. Achievement in schools (grades, goals, stress)
16. Depression (loneliness, loss)
17. Dropping out or being suspended/disciplined
18. Drug use (marijuana, alcohol, cocaine, nicotine, etc.)
19. Eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, obesity, weight control, self-image)
20. Family (communication, relationships, conflicts with family members)
21. Friendships (jealousy, communication, support)
22. Money (school expenses, living expenses, getting a job)
23. Popularity (fitting in, belonging, peer pressure)
24. Romantic relationships (girlfriend/boyfriend)
25. Sex-related concerns (sexual/romantic behavior, birth control, sexual identity, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases)
26. Thoughts of suicide, self-destructive actions, and high-risk behaviors
27. World issues (hunger, war, etc.)

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